Kyouji's body was blown backward.

His body slammed hard against the ground, and for a split second, Kyouji lost consciousness. But it was quite literally just a split second; he regained his senses in the very next instant.

"Damn it!"

Barely managing to force his body up, Kyouji looked up ahead.

Standing right before him, looking down at Kyouji, was a man clad in black, vestment-like robes, accompanied by a single doll-like demon serving him.

"Is it truly acceptable for someone who calls himself a Devil Summoner to expose such a pathetic state?"

The man in the robes, Sid Davis, spoke mockingly before letting out a loud, scoffing laugh.

"I'd prefer you save that kind of talk until you've actually challenged me to a fair and square fight."

Despite spitting out the curse, his situation was absolute worst. Not only was he outnumbered, but his body refused to listen to him.

To think he would be the one to make the first move... I really screwed up big time

Kyouji darted his eyes left and right, searching for an escape route, but no such path existed.

This was an alleyway in the shopping arcade of Yarai District, but something felt entirely wrong about the situation. Given how loud and flashy their clash had been, it wouldn't be surprising if bystanders showed some kind of reaction. Yet, the pedestrians just kept walking past, pretending to be completely indifferent.

What the hell is going on?

Kyouji gnashed his teeth and glared intensely at Sid.

"Are you hoping to call for help?"

Sid laughed, as if deeply amused by the thought.

"It is utterly futile. No one is going to save you. After all, this is a world continuous with reality."

"Like I give a damn."

Forcing down the rising panic inside him, Kyouji slowly stood back up on his feet.

"Basically, all I have to do is take you down, right? Simple enough."

"Is that so? To eliminate a Devil Summoner who doesn't even have a demon at his command is as effortless for me as twisting a baby's arm."

"Well, we'll just see about that."

(If only I could summon a demon...)

That was Kyouji's true, honest desire.
However, Sid had launched a surprise attack precisely to prevent him from doing so. There was absolutely no way that same Sid would simply overlook any attempt to summon a demon.

And more than anything else, the biggest threat was the pair of demons accompanying Sid. The demons had the appearance of anatomical torsos you might find in a science classroom, and they had been standing perfectly still without a single movement for a while now.
One might almost think they were just highly detailed toys, but it was these very demons that had launched the previous attack, sending Kyouji's body flying.

Due to the nature of his profession, Kyouji had encountered countless demons, but he had never laid eyes on the ones standing before him now.
What do I do?!

He couldn't even move his body properly, let alone summon a demon. On top of that, his opponent was Sid. His chances of survival were practically zero.

"It is a futile resistance, so would you mind dying for me now? As you can see, I am a very busy man."
The moment Sid snapped his fingers, the two demons began to move as if waking from a dream.

The demons moved with blinding speed. Kyouji, who had not yet recovered from the damage he took, could not even attempt to dodge. Unable to move an inch, Kyouji had no choice but to stand there like a sitting duck and brace for the demons' strike.

"Is that truly the extent of your strength? At the very least, you could try to entertain me."
Kyouji had absolutely no intention of fulfilling Sid's request, but he was completely at the mercy of the two demons, caught between them as they toyed with.

Kyouji groaned as his knees buckled. He was already in a state where he could collapse at any given second. The only thing keeping him from falling over was his stubborn pride as a Devil Summoner.

"I would have been delighted if you could hold out just a bit longer, but it looks like that is asking too much."

As Sid signaled with his eyes, the demons positioned themselves on either side of Kyouji, grabbing his arms and forcing him to stand upright.
Even though his body was only moved a fraction, a pain so excruciating that it almost made him scream flashed through his entire frame. Yet, perhaps because his sense of humiliation overrode everything else, he managed to somehow endure the agony.

"It must be painful, yes? Don't worry, I will put you out of your misery shortly."

"...Your little ambitions... I'm going to be the one to crush them. You'd better remember this... I will absolutely come back!"

"How amusing. I shall look forward to it."

A smirk played on Sid's lips as he pointed his right fist directly at Kyouji.

"In the name of my great Lord, I command you. O soul of Kyouji Kuzunoha, leave that vessel, and return to the distant depths of darkness!"

The very instant Sid spat out the curse, Kyouji felt a bizarre anomaly seizing his body. He felt intensely hot, as if engulfed in raging flames, and it even felt like the very blood inside his body was beginning to boil.

However, even that sensation quickly started to grow numb. The burning heat faded away, and Kyouji's consciousness rapidly thinned out at an accelerating pace away.

Damn it. I can't just die like this...

There was absolutely no doubt that Sid was plotting something sinister. If he wasn't stopped, a catastrophe of such magnitude that it could dye the very earth in blood would surely unfold.
Yet, Kyouji had no way left to prevent this disaster. Any second now, his soul would completely separate from his physical body.

Wait. Hold on. If it's him...

Within his fading consciousness, a brilliant alternative plan suddenly struck Kyouji.

Café Afro was dead quiet today, as usual.
This was despite the fact that the shop was located in the coastal park district in the southern part of Hirasaki City.
Though small, the café was stylishly designed, and the window seats offered an unobstructed view of the ocean. There was absolutely no reason for it not to be thriving.
Even so, the place was practically a ghost town, and Junya Ichi believed the sole reason for this was the master's incredibly intimidating face.

The master himself was actually a gentle, mild-mannered man, but his facial features were unfortunately terrifying. With his rugged looks and sharp, piercing glare, one couldn't help but feel he had chosen entirely the wrong line of work.

Junya took a seat at the counter and ordered a coffee from the master, who was diligently polishing glasses.

"Another date today? Must be nice," the master said in a friendly tone as he slid the coffee over to Junya.

"I wish it were a date," Junya replied with a bitter smile, dropping some sugar into his coffee and stirring it.

"But if your girl is Kumiko-san, any time and any place counts, right?"

"You really think so?"

"That's just how it is."

Listening to the master's rather unconvincing small talk, Junya checked his wristwatch. It was 4:00 PM.

She should be arriving any minute now...

Junya's eyes naturally drifted toward the café's entrance.

He had come to this coffee shop—their usual meeting spot—at the request of Kumiko Hatano, who wanted him to tag along to the library. He had been told that she needed to hand in a seminar report, so they were likely heading there to look up some reference materials.

"Talking with me must be pretty boring, huh? Want me to turn on the TV?"

Perhaps trying to be considerate, the master grabbed the remote control and clicked the television on.

On the television, a beautiful female anchor was reporting on an incident that had occurred earlier this morning.

"...Perhaps due to the blood being completely drained, the corpse was reportedly in a mummy-like state. It seems the police are currently unable to determine whether it is a homicide or an accidental suspicious death, leaving them with no choice but to wait for the results of the judicial autopsy. As similar incidents have been occurring frequently within Hirasaki City, the police are urging citizens to exercise extreme caution..."

The television screen cut away from a close-up of the anchor to footage of the apartment complex where the incident took place.

"I wonder if a *Kashaki* appeared or something."

The master, who had resumed polishing his glasses, glanced at the television and shrugged.

"Draining blood entirely from a human body is apparently a pretty monumental task, you know."

Junya took a sip of his coffee.

"Is that so? I always figured if you just severed the wrists, it would naturally all drain out on its own."

"Well, sure, it might flow out while the heart is still beating, but it stops pretty quickly after that. Even if it were a murder, I imagine it would take several people working together just to pull it off."

However, the fact that they couldn't definitively call it a homicide was exactly what made this case so bizarre.

If limbs had been severed, that would be one thing, but the body bore no notable external wounds whatsoever. It was no wonder the master brought up folklore like vampires or a *Kashaki* (a Japanese demon associated with moving corpses).

"It doesn't really seem like the kind of problem you can avoid just by 'exercising caution,' but I guess we have no choice but to be careful."

"A mummy putting himself in a coffin... I guess that fits a bit too well to even be a bad joke."

As Junya laughed, the master's intimidating face softened into a gentle expression. He wasn't anti-social after all.

While the two were enjoying their trivial banter, Kumiko Hatano burst into the shop, clutching a clutch bag tightly under her arm. She must have run all the way here; her shoulders were heaving up and down as she panted, trying to catch her breath.

"Welcome," the master said. He poured a glass of water, placed it on the counter, and gave them some space.

"Am I safe?!"

Kumiko slid into the seat right next to Junya and spoke in a clear, resonant voice.

"You're five minutes late."
Junya lifted his right hand, pointing directly at his wristwatch.

"That makes it nine consecutive times you've been late now. Do you still remember our promise that if you hit ten consecutive late arrivals, you have to buy me a treat?"

"Oh no, you actually remembered?"
Kumiko glanced sideways, trying to read the expression on Junya's face.

"Since you never fail to be late, I don't even need to make an effort to remember."

"There won't be a tenth time, so the promise itself is completely meaningless anyway."
Kumiko stuck her tongue out playfully before taking a sip from her glass of water.

"Is that so? Then from next time, how about we change it from ten times *in a row* to ten times *in total*?"
The moment Junya made the proposal, Kumiko puffed out her cheeks and pouted like a little child. That particular look of her —gestures were unbearably endearing to Junya. Kumiko acted completely innocent and carefree around him, but this was a true self she only ever showed to Junya.

The Hatano family was an old, established lineage residing in Koikutagaoaka, a neighborhood highly renowned as a high-class residential area. Bound by the strict traditions that came with such an old-money family, Kumiko was constantly forced to maintain the facade of a proper, refined young lady whenever she was out in public.

Even the plaid matching two-piece outfit she was wearing right now would likely demand an exorbitant price if bought at a store. Without a doubt, the cheapest item she currently had on her person was the pair of earrings that Junya had gifted her.

"Well, all I have to do is just not be late anymore!"

If he were someone who hated waiting, he would have grown angry, but Junya actually enjoyed waiting. He genuinely liked that vague stretch of time right before the other person finally showed up.

"You don't trust me at all, do you?"

"Nope, I don't."

"Ah! That was mean!"

"If you want me to trust you, you've got to show it through your actions."

Junya closed one eye and gave her a playful wink, prompting Kumiko to shrug her shoulders.

"But still, the next time you're reborn, you should make sure to find yourself a proper girlfriend who is perfectly punctual."

Junya had intended to tease her a bit to make her reflect on her lateness, but—

"Hey, hey! You need to use proper Japanese, or else you'll cause misunderstandings. Instead of saying 'the next time you're reborn,' shouldn't you have said 'even when you're reborn next time'?"
Kumiko blurted out the completely unexpected correction.

"So that means I'm going to be stuck with you in the next life, too?"

"Ah! You just made a face like you hated the idea!"
Kumiko gave Junya's cheek a gentle pinch.

Junya didn't truly believe they were having a lover's quarrel. However, he secretly wished that was exactly what it was.

"One way or another, two years have already flown by, haven't they?"
Kumiko said out of nowhere.

"Since what?"

"Since we started dating. Two whole years have passed."

"Oh, right. Has it really been that long already?"

The very first time Junya had met Kumiko was on the campus of Hokuto University.

Being the only daughter of the prestigious Hatano family, she had been the center of attention among the male students ever since she first enrolled. Yet, strangely enough, not a single guy had actually stepped up to ask her out. Because of the imposing weight of the Hatano family name, everyone wanted to get close to her but simply lacked the nerve to do so. However, there was one person who saw this as the perfect opportunity and launched a bold, courageous approach.

That person was Junya. As a result of his bravery, he successfully won Kumiko's heart.

Thinking back on it now, though, he found himself questioning why he had even confessed to Kumiko in the first place. It wasn't as if they had been particularly close back then

—ttan, and above all, the very first time they had ever exchanged words was when he confessed to her. There were several other eye-catching, cute girls on campus, and there had been absolutely no need for him to take such a reckless gamble and risk

becoming the laughingstock of the courtyard. Despite that, he had chosen Kumiko anyway. Could it really be some sort of twisted fate carried over from a past life?

When Junya voiced those thoughts out loud, Kumiko just laughed and called it the "red string of fate."

"Changing the subject... on my way here, I actually ran into your mother and a relative of yours."
Junya casually shifted the topic of conversation.

"With my mother?"
Junya nodded.

"It felt like she completely forgot my face or something. I greeted her, but she just totally ignored me."

"Are you sure that wasn't just a completely different person? There's no way my mom would ever forget your face, right?"
Kumiko made a brief gesture as if deep in thought.

"And first of all, there's no way you'd run into her in the city. She's been away on an overnight trip since yesterday."

"Oh, really? Man, she looked so much like her, though."

"Maybe... it might have been my aunt."
Kumiko looked straight into Junya's eyes as she spoke, as if suddenly remembering something.

"Your aunt?"

"Yeah. She's my mother's younger twin sister, so it wouldn't be strange at all if you mistook one for the other."

"Ah, that makes sense. She did look like a very refined lady, so maybe it really was your aunt."
Junya nodded, fully accepting the explanation.

"So, what do you want to do? Should we get going soon?"
Junya checked his wristwatch; the time was just about to hit 4:10 PM.

"Would it be better to get our errand out of the way first? Personally, I'd prefer to rest up for just a little bit longer before we go."

"I'm fine either way."

"Is that so? Well, then I'll take you up on that and rest a tiny bit more. Ah, Master! A coffee for me too, please."
The master nodded with a broad, easygoing gesture and served Kumiko her coffee.

"And now for our next story. Local residents are raising voices of protest against the 'Urban Redevelopment Plan' currently being pushed forward by Hirasaki City."

Junya shifted his attention back to the television screen.

"Junya-kun, what do you think about this redevelopment plan?"

"What do I think?"
Taking his eyes off the screen, Junya turned his face toward Kumiko.

"Are you for it? Or against it?"

"Well... if I had to choose, I guess I'm against it. Hirasaki is a city of culture, after all. It'd be kind of sad to see the current landscape change completely."

"Right? I think so too. If they're going to spend tax dollars on urban development, they ought to spend it on maintaining our cultural heritage instead."

More than anything else, what was drawing the immense ire of Hirasaki's citizens was the brand-new city hall building constructed in the Central District. It was a massive sixty-story

towering new city hall building, which was heavily criticized as a massive waste of tax dollars. Adding the "Urban Redevelopment Plan" on top of that, the citizens' fury was far from ordinary.

"There's a rumor that the mayor is tied to the Yakuza, but I wonder if that's actually true."

"You mean the rumor about him and Tendou?"

"Tendou" referred to Tenzan Tendou, the boss of the Tendou-gumi syndicate. Rumor had it that he used to highly value honor and code in the old days, but nowadays, he was the kind of figure who only ever made the news for generic organized crime. There were also whispers going around that his syndicate was currently being pushed back by a new rival power coming out of the Kanto region, but perhaps because no overt gang warfare had broken out yet, there wasn't any tense atmosphere hanging over Hirasaki City.

"Since he's a completely incompetent mayor, speculations keep flying that he's being pulled by someone's strings behind the scenes... but I highly doubt Mr. Tendou is the one involved."

It seemed Kumiko actually knew Tenzan Tendou personally. Given that they both lived in the upscale neighborhood of Koikutagaoka, it wasn't entirely surprising for them to be acquainted, though Junya found it a bit hard to swallow her stories about the ruthless Yakuza boss being a pleasant, sweet old man.

"Personally, I find Yamashiro to be the suspicious one. Didn't Yamashiro propose this whole redevelopment plan in the first place?"

Yamashiro was a member of the Hirasaki City Council.

"Yamashiro is incredibly shrewd, so there's definitely a more-than-likely chance that the mayor got completely wrapped around his finger."

"I don't really care who's pulling the mayor's strings, but they really ought to just recall him as soon as possible."
With that final remark, Kumiko brought the coffee cup to her lips.

Chapter 3

The library was located about a ten-minute walk from Café Afro.
Being a prefectural library, it boasted the largest collection of books in the entire prefecture. Perhaps because most of the reading materials one could ever need could be found here, the vast majority of its patrons were students.

After passing through the library entrance, Junya and Kumiko immediately headed straight for the book search terminals.

"What's the title of the book?"
Junya asked as he sat down in front of a terminal, looking up at Kumiko who was standing right beside him.

"It's called *'An Essay on Ancient Japanese Literature.'* It's a book written by Professor Yoshino... Apparently, the print run was incredibly small, so it's impossible to find a copy anywhere."

"Professor Yoshino... Is he a teacher at our university?"

"Ah, right. You aren't taking the Professor's seminar, are you, Junya-kun?"
The only thing Junya actually knew about the man was his last name.

"Why don't you just borrow a copy from the professor himself?"
Junya operated the keyboard, typing *'An Essay on Ancient Japanese Literature'* into the search bar field.

"That's the thing. I heard the professor doesn't even own a single copy himself."

"Seriously?! Are you sure the book itself isn't just completely mythical?"

However, the book did indeed seem to be published, as a search match flashed onto the screen.

"Let's go grab it before someone else borrows it."
Junya stood up from the terminal and headed toward the book stacks alongside Kumiko.

"Do you know anything about Professor Yoshino's academic theories?" Kumiko asked, her eyes remaining fixed on the bookshelves.

"Well, it'd definitely be a pain if someone took it first."

"They say his theories are so completely wild that he’s viewed as a total heretic by the academic society."

"Did he say something completely outrageous or something?"

"Oh, it's pretty incredible."
Kumiko leaned forward to scan the shelf.

"Supposedly, he claims that in ancient Japan, there was a civilization that actually used magic to rule over the country."

"Huh?!"

"Intriguing theory, isn't it? Though it doesn't seem like anyone really takes it seriously... Ah, here it is, here it is!"
Kumiko pulled a single volume from the bookshelf.

"I mean, no matter how you look at it, there's no way magic is real."

"I think so too, but just hearing about it has a nice sense of romance to it, don't you think?"
Kumiko looked to him for agreement, leaving Junya at a bit of a loss as to how he should react.

It certainly sparked the imagination, but as a theory published for serious academia, it was highly questionable. It was no wonder Professor Yoshino was treated like an outcast by his peers—

—it was a completely natural consequence.

"You might think it's silly and sounds like a fairy tale, but somehow it really captures the imagination. Maybe it's because a princess appears in the professor's stories."

"A princess from a magical kingdom, huh? Don't you think that makes it sound even more like a total scam?"

"Oh, come on. You never know. Isn't it completely possible that the professor's theory is actually the right one?"
Kumiko let out a playful, strained groan at his skepticism.

"So, are you going to use that book as a reference to write your seminar report?"

"Of course. That's exactly why I went through the trouble of coming all the way out here."
Kumiko spoke without a shred of hesitation.

"Are you sure you can actually write it?"

"How rude! Of course I can write it."

"I didn't mean it that way. I just meant, do you think writing about a civilization that thrived on magic will actually be accepted?"

"It'll be fine. I highly doubt the professor is so foolish that he would reject a report based on a theory he postulated himself."
Kumiko wasn't just a simple romanticist. In her own feminine way, she was also a realist.

"Let's hurry up and borrow it so we can grab something to eat."
When Junya agreed to the proposal, Kumiko began walking toward the front desk to go through the lending procedures. Junya followed right behind her.

"The loan period is one week starting from today."

The receptionist said so and asked for her library card to be presented.
Kumiko pulled her wallet out of her clutch bag and began rummaging through it.

"Oh, uh-oh?!"
As Kumiko searched her wallet, a completely bewildered look came over her face.
When Junya asked her what was wrong, Kumiko explained that she had forgotten her library card.

"Should I borrow it for you instead?"

"Oh, really? That would be amazing!"
Kumiko rejoiced with genuine relief.

Junya pulled his wallet out of his back jeans pocket, took out his library card, and handed it over. He then went through the standard procedures on Kumiko's behalf and successfully checked out the book.

"Thank you so much. You really saved me there."

Taking the book from Junya's hands, Kumiko slid it securely inside her clutch bag.

"You know, a brand-new restaurant just opened right in front of Yarai District Station. Did you hear about it?"

"Was it that place specializing in French cuisine?"

"Yeah, I've been dying to check it out."
Junya reacted instantly to Kumiko's subtle hint.

"Just so you know, my wallet is looking pretty sad right now."

"Don't worry about that. The bill for this one is completely on me."

"Is this an advance payment to clear your debt for being late?"

"Nope! It's my way of saying thanks for helping me check out the book."
Declaring this with absolute finality, Kumiko wrapped her arm tightly through Junya's, and the two began to walk.

Chapter 4

After seeing Kumiko off at the train station, Junya headed straight toward the shopping arcade in Yarai District.
His objective was to pick up some concert tickets that Kumiko had reserved in advance on her behalf.
The time was just ten minutes before 7:00 PM.
Even at an hour when even elementary school children walked around with completely unbothered faces, Kumiko was strictly forced to head back home. The Hatano family curfew was strictly set at 8:00 PM. Even if her parents were away on a trip, the family traditions still had to be rigidly followed. *I feel so bad for her...*

While he felt sorry for Kumiko being bound by such rigid rules, Junya couldn't help but feel a little bad for himself as her boyfriend too. His honest, true desire was to spend an entire night together with her just once, but it didn't look like that wish would be granted anytime soon. Even so, their relationship was still plenty of fun in its own way.
The only real difference was that they slept under different roofs; otherwise, they were

able to spend almost all their time together. Therefore, even without crossing any lines, Junya still felt a deep sense of satisfaction.

While lost in these thoughts, Junya finally arrived at the ticket agency outlet located right around the center of the shopping arcade.

—The ticket agency outlet was located on the very top floor of this building.
Junya passed through the automatic doors and stepped into the ground floor lobby, which housed a basic directory counter.

"Huh...?"

The exact instant he set foot inside the building, a spine-chilling shudder ran down Junya's back, making him tremble violently. It wasn't the natural chill of the weather, nor was it the artificial coolness of air conditioning; it was as if his very survival instincts were picking up an ominous threat. Even the lobby itself was visibly wrong. The air distorted slightly, and a faint, stale stench hung in the atmosphere. Was some kind of spell or barrier active? The fluorescent lights flickered repeatedly, projecting an overwhelming, crushing pressure that constantly bore down on Junya.

Thump, thump, thump...

Junya let out a silent, voiceless scream. Desperate to escape, he tried with all his might to squeeze out a shout for help. Yet, the only sound that escaped his throat was a completely incoherent, raspy whisper.

Junya backed away, attempting to flee from the building. However, completely without mercy, the automatic doors refused to budge even an inch.

N-no... please... body... somebody...

Under the extreme, suffocating tension, Junya felt himself on the very verge of fainting. The strength completely drained from his muscles, leaving him barely able to even remain standing on his feet.

Someone... anyone... help me...!

Desperately pounding against the tightly sealed glass doors, Junya cried out continuously for salvation. However, Junya's frantic prayers utterly failed to reach the heavens.

Crushed under a heavy sense of despair, Junya began to walk in search of another exit.

Because his feet could barely find their footing, Junya leaned tightly against the wall, dragging his body forward step by step. Just as he passed the main directory desk and headed toward the hallway leading to the upper floors, a bizarre, unsettling noise

echoed from behind the counter. Listening closely to the sound, he realized with a chill that it was the unmistakable sound of chewing.

His raw survival instincts screamed at him to run. Yet, Junya failed to obey them. He simply couldn't stop himself from verifying what it was. Forcing his trembling, unsteady body under control, he somehow managed to drag himself back to the counter. Then, he peeked over the edge.

"Eek!"

Junya let out a sharp shriek.

In that instant, he couldn't help but feel a wave of intense, crushing regret for not following his instincts to flee.

There, crouching out of sight behind the counter, was the creature. The humanoid entity stood at barely half the height of an adult man. Its hair was a wild, unkempt mess without a single trace of ever being combed, resembling a ragged ancient warrior. But what stood out most prominently was its heavily bloated abdomen—it looked almost exactly like a pregnant woman.

The hideous creature was frantically, savagely devouring something. It took practically no time at all for Junya to recognize that it was feeding on human flesh. Lying right beside the monster, scattered among the gnawed bones, were the remains of a man's business suit.

S-somebody help me...

Desperately fighting off the urge to faint as his consciousness began to fade, Junya scrambled backward, away from the counter.

Why... why is this happening to me...?!

He desperately wanted to believe it wasn't real, but this was undeniably reality. He wanted so badly to write it all off as a horrific nightmare, but the sheer terror of death assaulting all five of his senses made it completely clear that this was nothing other than absolute truth.

"So hungry..."

The voice echoed from out of nowhere.

"So hungry..."
"So hungry..."

Accompanied by low, guttural groans, the sound of approaching footsteps drew closer. For a brief moment, the flickering fluorescent lights flared up brightly, illuminating the entire lobby. In stark contrast to the newly lit floor, Junya felt a sudden illusion as if his entire vision had gone pitch black. There, standing directly before his eyes, were the exact same creatures that had been behind the counter. And there were three of them.

"So hungry..."

With slow, deliberate steps, the creatures closed the distance toward Junya. The fact that they viewed him as nothing more than a magnificent feast was glaringly obvious from the saliva continuously drooling from their loosely hanging mouths.

Turning his back on the creatures, Junya bolted down the hallway. However, his legs tangled beneath him, preventing him from running the way he wanted to. Finally, Junya tripped over his own feet and went crashing hard into the ground. Though his limbs slammed painfully against the floor, he could barely feel any pain—a terrifying sign that his consciousness was already beginning to fade away.

Junya forced his upper body up and looked back.

The creatures pursuing him had already closed in right beside him. This was the absolute definition of playing cat and mouse with a cornered prey. Even if his attackers had been human and he could beg them for mercy—

—but when dealing with completely unknown lifeforms, such a concept wouldn't even cross a person's mind. That was the grim reality.
Much like a prisoner standing atop a lethal execution scaffold, Junya had no alternative but to simply shudder under the descending weight of absolute terror and dread.

"So hungry..."

The creature standing directly over Junya stretched its hands out toward his body. Bracing himself for inevitable death, Junya squeezed his eyes shut and waited for the final blow. However, that precise moment completely failed to come.

Grrrrrrrrr...

Instead, the fierce, guttural growl of a massive beast echoed into his ears.

Junya heavily forced his eyes open and scanned his surroundings. The three humanoid creatures were still standing right in front of him. The scene itself looked no different than before, except for one detail—all three of them now had their backs turned away from Junya.

Shifting his gaze forward, he saw a massive beast baring its fangs, standing directly opposite the three creatures.
The beast possessed the face of a canine, though it lacked even a single shred of amiability. It boasted a magnificent mane that strongly resembled that of a male lion, and razor-sharp claws continuously peeked in and out from its thick, log-like legs. Its total body length easily stretched to about three meters long. It was roughly the exact size of a full-grown lion.

With its mane standing entirely on end, the beast breathed heavily through its snout, radiating an intense aura as if it were about to spring into a savage attack at any given second.

What the hell is this?! What is even happening anymore?! Please, just make it stop...

Junya was utterly incapable of grasping the reality of the situation.
Why... why do I have to go through something like this?!

And just like that, Junya fell into a state of sheer, unadulterated panic.

The beast let out a single howl, dug its paws into the floor, and charged forward. Seemingly startled by this sudden movement, the humanoid creatures turned their backs on the beast to flee, but... closing the distance in the blink of an eye, the beast sank its teeth deep into one of them. With a violent shake of the beast's neck, the creature was slammed hard against the wall, dying instantly.

The beast's relentless assault did not stop there. It pinned down one of the remaining two creatures with its forepaw, completely robbing it of freedom, while using its sharp claws to strike the back of the other. Severely wounded, the creature rolled around frantically on the floor, letting out a screech so agonizing it made one want to cover their ears.

Junya remained frozen, completely unable to move an inch. He was entirely crushed under the sheer weight of hopelessness and terror, having lost even the basic will to run away.

The beast let out a low rumble from its throat, scanning Junya's body from head to toe as if inspecting him. Junya trembled violently every time he saw the creature's sharp fangs.

"Good grief. To think I'd end up having my feet dragged down by a pathetic mess like this..."

Before he even realized it, a man was now standing directly in front of Junya. Clad in a pristine, pure-white suit, the man stood with both of his hands casually thrust deep inside his trousers pockets.

With an emotionless yet overwhelmingly intense and piercing glare, the man stepped forward and brought his foot down directly onto the head of the *Gaki* (starving ghost) that was still writhing on the floor. With a sharp sound, the demon was silenced. The aftermath of the strike was truly unsettling.

W-who... who on earth is this guy...?!

Even before figuring anything else out, Junya couldn't tell whether the man standing before him was an enemy or an ally. The fact that he had casually stomped a *Gaki* to death made it clear that he was definitely hostile toward the monsters. Even so, it was equally glaringly obvious that this wasn't someone Junya could easily strike up a friendly relationship with.

Gaki—starving ghosts—were the souls of the deceased who had fallen into the Realm of Hungry Ghosts. They were condemned to hellish entities that suffered from perpetual hunger and thirst, doomed to never have their appetites satisfied. Until now, Junya had considered them nothing more than mere superstition, but what stood before his very eyes was absolute, undeniable reality.

"Let's move," the man said dismissively. Passing right by Junya, he began walking toward the stairs.

"Let's go, Cerberus!"

The beast addressed as **Cerberus** delivered a final, fatal blow to the starving ghost it had been pinning down before turning to follow right behind the man. Junya remained standing there completely dumbfounded, watching their retreating backs, but—

"If you keep standing around like a statue in a place like that, you're just going to end up as bird food for the rest of them."

The man halted right before the staircase and spoke without even bothering to look back.

"If you don't want to die, you'd better fall in line right behind me. Though, I make absolutely no guarantees that you'll make it out of here alive."

Junya bolted toward the man at absolute full speed.
Before he knew it, they had arrived at the fourth floor of the stricken building.

Just how many starving ghosts had they killed by the time they reached this floor? Junya was in no state of mind to keep count, but it was certainly far too many to count on both hands.
Yet, the number of humans devoured must have been vastly greater. More than twice the number of demons, human victims had been crammed down into those hellish, unfillable stomachs.

The man accompanied by Cerberus advanced toward the ticket agency counter. Keeping as close as possible, Junya followed right behind them.
The man opened the entrance to the ticket office and stepped inside without a single shred of hesitation. Cerberus followed, and Junya entered last, bringing up the rear.

The interior of the ticket office presented a scene of absolute horror, looking precisely like the terrifying depictions of the Six Realms of Buddhist Hell. For a moment, one might even fall into the illusion that they had actually been dropped straight into the depths of hell itself.
Starving ghosts swarmed all over the place, savagely devouring the ticket agents and customers alike.

The suffocating, overpowering stench of blood made Junya feel violently nauseous. The contents of his stomach surged upward, leaving him on the absolute verge of throwing up at any second.

"Heheheh, this is the absolute best... the old man told me not to make a huge scene, but it's not like you can just stop this kind of fun so easily, right?"

A deeply unpleasant man's voice echoed through the room.
Shifting his eyes toward the source of the sound, Junya spotted a single individual mingling right alongside the swarming demons. The man was actively participating in the assault on a female customer, appearing to revel in the chaos.

It looked as though all of her bodily fluids were being actively drained; the woman's body already resembled a piece of dried parchment.
Junya suddenly remembered the string of incidents occurring frequently across Hirasaki City. The mysterious deaths where corpses were completely drained of blood. Junya felt a sensation bordering on absolute certainty that the truth behind those cases lay right here.

"Hey, you low-life thug!"
The white-suited man hurled a sharp, angry shout directly at the criminal.

"Huh? Who the hell do you think you are?!"
Licking his freshly blood-stained lips with his tongue, the thug turned his face over with an incredibly arrogant gesture.

"That expensive suit of yours ends right here. You're going to die right where you stand!"
The thug drew a short knife that had been concealed inside his clothes, flashing a fearless, mocking grin.

"What an incredible gleam..."
Junya muttered under his breath involuntarily.

It wasn't because the knife was reflecting the room's lighting; rather, the blade itself appeared to be radiating its own brilliant luminosity. To Junya, it looked as if the blade were glowing with a power entirely its own.

"So you think you can take on the great Takashi? Entertaining. I'll gladly be your opponent."
The man who called himself **Takashi** cracked his knuckles loudly and began closing the distance with slow, deliberate steps.

"Whoops, actually, there's absolutely no need for me to go through the trouble of handling you myself."
Finding something immensely amusing about the situation, Takashi let out a dry, raspy laugh.

That laugh was almost certainly a signal

The starving ghosts, who until a moment ago had been completely fixated on devouring human flesh, all spun around at once to face the white-suited man.

"Trash. I'll send every last one of you straight back to the Netherworld."

The man raised his short sword and brought it down with all his might. The blade's brilliant radiance flared even brighter, unleashing a swirling vortex of overflowing light that flew directly toward the *Gaki*. Engulfed in the light, the demons let out agonizing

shrieks on the spot before dissolving entirely into dust. Any remaining stragglers that the man happened to miss were systematically bitten to death by Cerberus.

It was an incredibly swift display of martial prowess; it took less than a single minute to completely wipe out every single starving ghost inside the ticket office.

"G-gaaah... That's impossible..."

"What's wrong, low-life? Looks like you can't even last a thousandth of a second."
The man flashed a fearless smirk and smoothly returned his short sword to its sheath.

"Y-you're pretty good, aren't you..."
Takashi put up a bold front, but he was slowly and deliberately backing away.

"I wouldn't mind taking you on myself, but I just remembered I have some urgent business to attend to."

"If it's business, I'll gladly take care of it for you. Because you're going to die right here."
The moment the man signaled with his eyes, Cerberus charged at full speed straight toward Takashi.

"You've got to be kidding me! There's no way in hell I'm dying yet!"
Takashi smashed right through the window glass behind him and hurled himself out of the building.

Wait, we're on the fourth floor!
Junya didn't have the slightest intention of worrying about Takashi's safety, but he couldn't help but think that this was an altogether too extreme way to escape. If he jumped down

from this height, there was absolutely no way he would walk away in one piece.

It was practically identical to jumping to one's death. Junya was absolutely certain that a gruesome, mangled corpse had to be lying on the street below, but then a chilling thought crossed his mind—what if Takashi wasn't actually human...?

"Hey. It's over."

The man's casual mutter brought Junya snapping back to reality.
Come to think of it, the uncontrollable trembling that had seized his entire body had finally subsided.
Though the stench of blood still made him want to grimace, the crushing, suffocating pressure in the air was completely gone. His pounding heartbeat was also gradually regaining its calm.

"Am I... am I actually saved?"

The ambient hum of the city streets and the brilliant, colorful glow of the neon signs outside flooded in through the freshly shattered window. It was an ordinary, everyday sight, yet to Junya, it felt overwhelmingly comforting and nostalgic.

"You should be able to get outside now."
With those words, the white-suited man turned and walked out of the ticket office.

Down on the ground floor lobby of the building, the man suddenly halted and stopped Junya.

"Listen to me. Don't say a single word about this to anyone."
The man narrowed his eyes, delivering the instruction with strict intent.

"But... so many people died here..."

"If you don't want to end up dead yourself, you'd better learn to turn a blind eye."

Junya could tell from the man's behavior up until now that if he said he would kill him, he truly meant it. He had no choice but to comply.

Right at that moment.

"Hold on a minute, Kyouji! A full-fledged Devil Summoner shouldn't be getting so worked up over a mere kid!"

Passing smoothly right through the automatic doors—which were supposed to have been tightly shut and completely immovable—a woman dressed in a sharp black suit strode into the room.

Simultaneously, the fluorescent lights that had been flickering erratically returned to normal, casting an even, steady glow across the entire floor.

So... this guy's name is Kyouji...

"Rei. What the hell did you come here for?"
Kyouji spared a brief glance at the woman he called **Rei**, his expression instantly souring into a look of heavy displeasure.

"I went through all the trouble of rushing over here for you, and that's the kind of cold reception I get?"

"I don't recall ever asking you for help."

"Well, of course you don't. After all, I came here entirely on my own judgment."
Rei ran her fingers like a comb through her short hair, which was styled with prominent blonde streaks.

"Don't you have plenty of other things you ought to be doing right now?"

Completely turning a deaf ear to Kyouji's complaints, Rei walked right over to Junya's side.

"Hey there, kiddo. You'd better hurry on home. A whole bunch of scary guys are going to be showing up here very soon."
With those words, Rei gave him a playful wink.

"Hold on, Rei. I still have use for that kid."

"What's the point of keeping him here?" Rei countered.

"He witnessed the crime scene."

"He's going to forget all about it, right? Then it's fine. Besides, even if he did talk about what happened here, it's not like anyone would ever believe him anyway."

Kyouji gestured with a brief, contemplative look, but seemingly convinced, he jerked his chin toward the exit.

"See ya, kiddo. Take care on your way home."
Watched over by the two summoners, Junya bolted straight toward the exit.

Chapter 5

Leaving the multi-tenant building behind as if escaping for his life, Junya vanished into the bustling crowds of the shopping arcade.
For now, he simply wanted to place himself somewhere packed with people. He felt that was his absolute safest bet.

The entire incident felt like something out of a dream, yet it possessed altogether too much vivid reality. More than anything else, the foul stench of blood still lingered sharply in his senses.
As he forced his way through the heavy crowds along the main avenue, Junya found himself constantly replaying the horrific events inside the building over and over in his mind.

Those starving ghosts, and that thug who called himself Takashi—no matter how you looked at it, none of it was normal.

It was less about him being strong and more about him being completely unhuman...
Was Takashi even a human being to begin with?
Since he jumped down from the fourth floor of a building, it wouldn't have been surprising at all to see him squashed on the ground like a frog run over by a car. Yet,

despite that, there was absolutely no sign of Takashi anywhere around the perimeter of the multi-tenant building.

However, the biggest question of all was the true nature of those two people.
Who exactly were Kyouji and Rei? Junya's thoughts focused entirely on that mystery.
The sight of Kyouji remaining completely unfazed in front of those monsters, systematically dispatching them without breaking a sweat, was nothing short of terrifying to Junya.

Devil Summoner...?!

Junya recalled the exact words that Rei had thrown toward Kyouji.
Whether it was a proper name or a profession, Junya had absolutely no idea. It was a term he was hearing for the very first time in his life. Even so, he knew with absolute certainty that these people belonged to a world that was completely unimaginable to an ordinary person.

The fact that they weren't ordinary was glaringly obvious just by looking at that beast, Cerberus, who followed right behind Kyouji.
In the first place, how on earth did he manage to tame a beast that massive?
Furthermore, his questions were endless regarding how they had managed to slip through the main avenue of Yarai District without even using a single leash.

Above all, if that beast truly was the Cerberus that appeared in Greek mythology, it was an absolutely mind-boggling revelation. After all, Cerberus was supposed to be the "Watchdog of Hell" that guarded the very entrance to the Underworld.
Admittedly, both its monstrous appearance and its brutal behavior certainly made it worthy of being called a watchdog of hell. However, Junya secretly wished it was just a regular pet name that Kyouji had made up. If a literal mythological monster was casually strutting down the city streets, no amount of lives would ever

be enough.

Junya let out a heavy sigh and forced all of these thoughts completely out of his mind.
Every single time he allowed himself to think about those two, it instantly triggered the horrific memory of the humans actively being devoured alive by those starving ghosts inside that multi-tenant building.

Tomorrow's front-page headline was undoubtedly going to be entirely about the incident at the building.
How on earth would the police handle a case like this? Even if their lives depended on it, they would never publicly admit that entities from an altered reality had attacked people. If that were the case, the investigation was highly likely to hit a permanent dead

end. Public pressure on the police would surely intensify, but this incident was a completely fatal blow to conventional law enforcement anyway.

Even so, Junya absolutely could not go to the police himself. The very second he reported it, he would be sealing his own fate—doomed to either be murdered by Kyouji or ripped to shreds by Cerberus.
Since there wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that Kyouji would ever voluntarily walk into a police station, it looked like the citizens of the city would have no choice but to spend the foreseeable future trembling in absolute terror every single day.

Ah... the tickets.

Junya suddenly remembered the actual, genuine reason he had gone to the ticket agency outlet in the first place.
Man, Kumiko is going to be absolutely furious with me...

However, with the ticket office left in that gruesome state, picking up the concert tickets was completely out of the question. Convincing Kumiko was going to be an incredibly exhausting ordeal, but he figured it was still a thousand times better than being eaten alive by a *Gaki*.

"Huh...?"

Snapping back to his senses, Junya suddenly became aware of a bizarre anomaly spreading through his surroundings. Aside from the stark white painted lines on the road, every single trace of color was actively draining away from the scenery—

away. Junya fell into the sudden illusion that he had accidentally wandered straight into a monochrome film.

The pedestrians walking along the main avenue just kept passing right by him, completely ignoring Junya as he stood frozen on the spot. Furthermore, the passersby didn't even brush against his body; they simply phased straight through him as they walked.

A sharp, icy chill shot directly down Junya's spine. This was the exact same sensation he had experienced just a short while ago.
The hellish images from inside the multi-tenant building flashed vividly back into the forefront of his mind.

A chain reaction of terror began crawling its way up from his very toes, rapidly seizing complete control of Junya. The strength drained from his limbs like a receding tide, and the suffocating tension made him feel so violently nauseous he could barely stand. Even so, he managed to somehow remain upright on his feet.

"You are Junya Ichi-san, correct?"

Suddenly, a man's voice descended upon him from directly behind.

Spinning around, Junya found a man clad in jet-black robes standing right before his eyes. His hair was streaked with strands of gray, giving him the distinct appearance of a Christian pastor. However, the dark aura actively radiating from his body made it instantly clear that this man was no servant of God.

"Do you mind if we have a little chat?"
The dark-skinned, Asian-looking man offered a deeply unnatural, subservient smirk.

"W-who are you?!"
Junya's voice trembled uncontrollably in short bursts.

"Ah, please forgive my lack of manners. My name is Sid Davis.

Sid bowed with deeply exaggerated, polite manners.

"By the way, Ichi-san. Would you mind handing over the book you borrowed to me?"

"The book?"

"You checked out a book from the library, did you not? I am simply asking you to entrust that book to me."

Ah, I see, Junya thought as pieces clicked together. However, he had only checked it out on Kumiko's behalf; the book wasn't actually in his possession right now.

"I can't give it to you. That thing has absolutely nothing to do with you."

Sid closed the distance between himself and Junya, extending his hand outward.

"Come now, quickly!"

Sid was highly intimidating, but Junya couldn't hand over an object he literally didn't have on him.
Why the hell am I being threatened over a regular library book?

Feeling the sheer absurdity of the situation, Junya informed him that he had already lent the book to someone else. It was a quick-witted move on his part to intentionally keep Kumiko's name completely out of it.

"Is that so? That is quite a problem."
Sid seemed to turn the matter over in his mind for a moment, but having apparently reached a quick conclusion, his eyes snapped right back onto Junya.

"By the way, Ichi-san. Do you happen to know what becomes of completely useless human beings?"

"Huh?"
Junya let out a totally blank, dumbfounded sound. Finding his reaction immensely amusing, a vulgar smirk played across Sid's lips

staring intently at Junya.

"Useless human beings have absolutely no value in remaining alive."
He spoke as if deeply amused by the thought.

"And you, who went out of your way to trouble me, are entirely useless."
Sid's twin eyes harbored the savage, fierce glint of a predatory wild beast.

He's going to kill me!

Junya scrambled backward.
Instinctively realizing his fate, Junya spun around away from Sid and bolted at absolute maximum speed.

"Oh? Are you running away? I always believed one ought to listen to what another person has to say until the very end."

Turning a completely deaf ear to Sid's words, Junya just kept running. He forcefully pushed past the frozen pedestrians, running blindly with everything he had.
Y-you've got to be kidding me. Like hell I'm dying here!

His adult life had only just begun. There was absolutely no way he would throw it away so miserably. Junya sprinted like a madman. Yet, no matter how far he ran, the colors failed to return to the world; the cold, inorganic grayscale space simply stretched on endlessly.

He must have run for at least two or three hundred meters by now. His breath was starting to cut short, but Junya refused to halt. He figured that maximizing his distance from Sid, even by a fraction, was his only way to increase his chances of survival. However, Junya's exhaustion was rapidly approaching its absolute peak. While his fierce will to live didn't show a single sign of wavering, every single joint in his body was screaming in agony.

Veering off the main avenue, Junya ducked into a narrow side alley and concealed himself behind a shadow, desperately trying to catch his breath.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before Sid found him and killed him. Yet, even as he tried to devise a plan, not a single idea came to mind. The more he panicked, the more chaotic Junya's thoughts became.
He didn't stand a chance bare-handed. Even if he were carrying a weapon, Sid was not an opponent he could match. Junya's raw survival instincts acutely picked up on the absolute disparity in their strength.

Right at that exact moment.

"Are you done running already?"

A voice so bone-chilling it brought out immediate goosebumps assaulted Junya.
No way... How...?!

Looking up, Sid—who was supposed to be left far behind in the distance—was now standing right before his eyes.
This shouldn't be possible...!

The unscientific word *teleportation* flashed across Junya's mind. But something like that shouldn't actually happen in reality. Superpowers were things meant to be strictly confined to comic books.

"Oh dear, look at that. The demon has completely caught up to you," Sid said in a mockingly playful tone.

"If you don't hurry up and run, you're going to end up as the demon's dinner."

Scrambling to his feet, Junya shoved past Sid and took off sprinting again. However, no matter how much or how far he ran, Sid simply kept materializing ahead of him, waiting for his arrival. Eventually, completely out of breath, Junya found himself utterly unable to move another inch and collapsed flat onto the ground.

He's going to kill me.

Junya trembled violently with the absolute terror of impending death.
N-no, please... I don't want to die!
I... I don't want to die!

Junya had lived a normal life completely disconnected from the concept of death. He had never imagined, even in his wildest dreams, that he would meet such a thoroughly absurd and unfair end.

"...I don't want to die!"

Funneling all his remaining strength into both legs, Junya forced himself up and swung his right fist straight at Sid. However, with nothing more than a simple tilt of his head, Sid effortlessly dodged the strike. It was a slow, clumsy punch akin to a boxer on the very brink of a knockout—it was only natural that Sid avoided it so easily.

Having completely lost his balance after missing his target, Junya's legs tangled beneath him, and he went crashing hard onto the ground. This time, he found himself utterly unable to move a single muscle.

"You really shouldn't overexert yourself. I'll put you out of your misery right away."
Sid declared coldly. With those words alone, Junya's consciousness began to rapidly drift away.

Am I... am I actually dying...?

As all remaining strength completely drained from his frame, Junya felt his entire body sway.

"Oh? Falling unconscious already? How incredibly disappointing..."
While listening to the distant echo of Sid's mocking voice, Junya's consciousness blacked out entirely into oblivion.

"Where... am I?"

Junya's perspective was fixed in a completely bizarre place. His point of view was positioned at an angle exactly as if he were looking down from a second-story window. But that wasn't the only strange thing. Junya was actively looking down at his very own body, which lay miserably spread-eagle flat on its back on the dark asphalt of the shopping arcade street. A massive crowd of onlookers had already formed around his fallen body, and from the outer edge of the gathering, paramedics were aggressively pushing their way through while carrying a stretcher.

That's... definitely me, right?

Junya tried to move closer to his own physical body, but he was violently deflected back, as if blocked by an invisible wall. Far from getting closer, he actually seemed to be gradually drifting further and further away. His essence was floating upward into the air, as if being pulled by some unknown entity.

Junya looked down at his current form. He was completely unclad, without a single thread on him. Furthermore, his form was exposed directly to the open air, and from time to time, his very soul shivered.

Am I dead?

In television dramas, there's always that classic scene where a character looks down at themselves lying on a hospital bed, and this was exactly like that. One could say his soul had completely separated from his physical flesh. Junya was currently in the exact state commonly referred to as a ghost.

However, looking at it from that perspective, everything actually made perfect sense. The fact that he wasn't wearing any clothes wasn't strange at all if he considered that he had become a purely spiritual entity. Moreover, since he was dead, there was absolutely no way for him to simply pop back into his physical body.

But... why did I...

Junya tried desperately to piece together the exact reason behind his death. However, his mind felt entirely clouded and hazy, and his memories utterly failed to resurface.

Did I leave my memories behind in the physical world along with my body?

While he was blankly turning this thought over, Junya's soul began to float higher and higher.

"Ah... that's right. I was attacked by Sid..."
Junya completely regained his memories.

Sid had delivered a definitive, fatal blow to him. That was precisely why he was here right now.
Looking back down at the ground below, Junya searched for any sign of Sid. However, the streets were completely jam-packed with chaotic crowds of onlookers, making it entirely impossible to confirm Sid's location.

While he was attempting to scan the area, the scenery around him took a sudden, dramatic turn.
His surroundings grew intensely dark in an instant, and a thick void began to actively erode Junya's spiritual form. The light faded away step by step until finally, an absolute, true darkness completely swallowed the entire world.

He was dropped into a state where he couldn't even confirm the existence of his own body. Was he actively moving, or was he perfectly stationary? Was he facing upward, or was he looking down? Because there wasn't a single physical landmark to orient himself, he was utterly incapable of grasping his current situation. On top of that, he couldn't hear a single solitary sound. It was an isolation so profound it felt like it could drive a person completely insane.

Someone... anyone... please save me...!

He thought about how much happier he would be if he could just lose his mind and entirely forget who he was. However, unfortunately for him, Junya's psyche seemed to be built incredibly resilient, preventing him from slipping into absolute madness.

Right at the exact instant Junya ceased all of his thoughts entirely, a single, brilliantly glowing pathway suddenly materialized within the pitch-black void

appeared.

"Light?!"

Junya traced the radiance with his eyes. The light snaked and twisted repeatedly as it stretched upward toward the heavens.
Is it telling me to climb up this way?

However, when he thought about the events that likely awaited him ahead, he couldn't bring himself to blindly follow it. If he pushed forward like this, it would mean fully accepting his death. Unable to completely come to terms with his own demise and still utterly unable to discard his fierce attachment to life, Junya hesitated right before the light.

Yet, he couldn't exactly just stay put here forever, either.

"Is what lies ahead heaven, or is it..."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Junya threw himself straight into the light.

When he snapped back to his senses, Junya found himself standing at the edge of a river. It was a river so exceptionally wide that it gave the sudden illusion of being a massive ocean. In fact, he could actually see the horizon in the distance, and from where Junya stood, it was entirely impossible to even confirm the opposite shore. He tried narrowing his eyes to get a better look, but what couldn't be seen simply couldn't be seen. It was a total waste of focus, only serving to needlessly strain his eyes.The water was remarkably beautiful.

In all his life, Junya had never seen a river with water of such incredibly high transparency.
It flowed with a gentleness that seemed almost capable of stopping time itself, its surface reflecting a dazzling scattering of light. Junya started to stretch his hand toward the water, but pulled it back halfway through. He felt as though dipping his hands into it would somehow defile the pristine river.

"Still, though..."

Junya scanned his surroundings, but behind him lay nothing more than an endlessly stretching pebbled riverbank, devoid of any other notable features. He was standing in a thoroughly bizarre world that seemed to blur the very boundary between the horizon of the water and the horizon of the land.
There wasn't a single sign of plant life around; only a mild, peaceful breeze blew across the expanse. Despite the environment seeming perfectly capable of supporting vegetation, not even a single weed grew anywhere in the profound distance. Whatever the reason might be, it was a completely surreal and eccentric spectacle.

"Is this truly the Sanzu River...?"

Junya gazed at the water once more. The magnificent flow of the great river possessed a presence so immense that it felt downright divine.
So the Sanzu River actually existed...

"Precisely."

"Who's there?!"

There was barely any need to shout out to verify it. Before he even realized it, an old man was standing right upon the surface of the river directly in front of him. He was a haggard-looking elder with stark white hair and a long beard. However, the old man possessed a piercing, noble gaze that was completely unimaginable given his otherwise wretched appearance.

"Who are you?"

"Welcome, o soul of Junya Ichi. I am Charon, the ferryman of this river."
The old man spoke in a raspy, weathered voice.

"Charon? Ferryman? Which means... this river is..."

"The Sanzu River. It is also known by another name—the River Acheron."
Charon offered a mild, gentle smile.

"O soul of Junya Ichi, you must now receive divine judgment here."

"Am I really dead?"

"Precisely."
Charon replied without a moment's hesitation.

"Is it completely impossible for me to come back to life?"

"It cannot be done."

"Are you absolutely certain?"
Junya continued to press him desperately.

"But going back to the living world ought to be possible, right?! You are the ferryman of this river. If you can ferry people across, then surely the reverse must be possible too!"

He was completely aware that this was an entirely unreasonable and absurd request. Yet, he simply couldn't hold the words back. If there was even a one-in-a-million chance that he could return to the realm of the living, he wanted to bet everything on it. He absolutely could not stand the thought of just doing nothing and blindly accepting his fate

He couldn't just give up. *This must be exactly what it feels like to be a wandering spirit unable to find peace,* Junya thought to himself.

However, Charon remained completely cold and detached.

"I am merely a ferryman. My only duty is to follow the divine will of the heavens."

"No way... Can I truly not come back to life? Isn't there some kind of loophole or method?! It doesn't even have to be a proper method—just let me meet God, that's all I ask!"

Junya let the words pour out all at once in a desperate, frantic rush. Yet, Charon did nothing but silently and slowly shake his head.

"I don't want to die. Like hell I'm going to just accept being dead!"

"You must resign yourself to your fate."

"Why?! Why the hell do I have to be the one to die?! Just tell me that much!"

"Because that is your destiny."

"Destiny?! So you're telling me I was always meant to die like this? Are you saying I was brought into this world just to meet a pathetic end like this?! Give me a break!"

Junya barked his rage at the heavens, but not a single flicker of emotion crossed Charon's face.
Do I really have no choice but to give up?

He still had so many deep regrets binding him to the living world. He wanted to have more fun, and he wanted to go on trips. He was incredibly worried about the parents he had left behind as well. If they found out he was dead, they would be absolutely devastated. Being an only child, Junya had carried the entirety of his parents' hopes and expectations on his shoulders.

But even more than that, he was deeply anxious about Kumiko. What would become of her now? Would she find another man and start a completely new life without him?